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Abstract

Characteristics of language variety are identified, and language systems are viewed as having their own sympathetic patterns which are not deviant from but which are different from each other. The relationship of language variation to literacy is discussed, and matching beginning reading materials to the child's oral language is seen to facilitate learning how to read. Teachers are encouraged to defer their desire to correct every nonstandard form in their students' speech and are urged to encourage communication in their students. The study of children's language is viewed as the core area of teacher preparation. Areas of suggested study which are briefly explained include the nature of language in general and of nonstandard English, field work in child language, and oral language and reading. (RT)

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Language Variation and Litera cy

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Although variety in language has long been valued in the area of written composition, among teachers there has been considerable reluctance of accept variation in the oral production of English. It is paradoxical that students are urged to vary the vocabulary and grammatical patterns of their essays while, at the same time, they are downgraded when their pronunciation and grammar vary from the accepted norm of the classroom or the individual teacher. To be sure, this is an oversimplification of the contrast, for it is not that teachers dislike oral language variety as much as it is that they seem to dislike the particular variety being used. For oral language has tremendously wider use than written language and is subject to a many more small group norms. Thanks to the relatively permanent nature of written language, it can be more easily scrutinized and subjected to standardization on a national basis. As a consequence, the accepted codes of grammar have been well established in written composition and attempts at improving writing skills assume this code and focus on the principle of variety in lexicon and syntax. That is, it is considered bad to use the same sentence patterns over and over again and it is bad to reuse the same noun or verb within a specified number of words or phrases. The principle of language variety, then, is highly valued within the confines of these specifications. And this would seem to end the matter.

RE 001 965

But just how different are these specifications for the value of variety in written language from the value of variety in oral language? Written language values stem from the derived norms of a well-defined and highly visible society - the writing public. The oral language values stem from the derived norms of an as yet rather ill-defined society which is highly visible and very important to the speaker but not as highly visible or important to a person who is not a member of that sub-group. Both writing and oral language norms, as well as concepts of variation, grow out of the values of a social group and are modified by the nature of the medium. In principle they are quite similar although in fact they contrast considerably because of differences in group make-up and the medium of reception.

Any formal attempt to place values on language variation will need to first identify the group which is being evaluated with enough precision to compare it to a group with which it presumably contrasts. Such groups may be based on memberships as large as male-female differences or as small as friendship circles. They may be as difficult to define as social status groups or as easy to define as age. They may also show contrasts based on geography, race, or contextual style. All of these sub-groups of our society pose problems of identification and inter-relationship. But such is the task of the field sociolinguistics when it attempts to analyze language in relationship to society. Whereas many linguists focus on the generally accepted language norms of a whole society, sociolinguists are concerned with the language variation which sets off the small groups of a whole society.

Just as linguists assume that the language used by a group of people is adequate for meeting the needs of its users, so sociolinguists assume that the variety of language used by a given community

is equally adequate for its users. The social acceptability of a language or a variety of that language is not relevant to its adequacy for communication. Thus the social values of written language are defined in one way while the social values on oral language may be defined quite differently. Likewise the social values of the language of people from different age, sex, social, geographical and racial groups may be quite different. If each sub-group heard only the speech of its own group there would be no such thing as language variety.* Language variety exists when a member of one group uses a linguistic feature which is not shared by another group or which is not shared with the same general frequency.

The systematic study of language variety of American English has been carried on for several decades now. We currently know quite a bit about geographical variation and historical change in our language, thanks to the efforts of linguistic geographers. In the past few years we have also begun to learn something about social differences in language. Sociolinguists have flown in the face of considerable pressures from many sources and have studied language variety based on race -- at a time when it is never clear what the establishment position may be, or even who constitutes the establishment. We now talk about Black English as one of these legitimate varieties of English and we concern ourselves with the speakers of this variety as they come in contact with other varieties or oral language and with written language as well.

To this point I have made a somewhat laborious case for the legitimacy of variation in language. I have said that variety can

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* This, of course, is a generalization which overlooks, for our purpose here, variation at the individual level.

be a desired commodity in composition and I have implied that variety in oral language has not been viewed with favor, among educators at least. I have observed, furthermore, that varieties of language may be observed in relation to the sub-groups of our society. Whether variety stems from the functions of language (as in the case of varied sentence patterns) or from the forms of language (the usual identifiers of social dialects), distinguishing features can be seen as systematic, adequate for the communication needs of its users, and appropriate in its own setting. Language variation poses no problems until it comes in contact with listeners, writers and speakers who use a different variety or who, at least, react negatively toward it.

This question of the adequacy and appropriateness of a given variety of language can be viewed in terms of <u>deficit</u> versus <u>difference</u>. Many educators have viewed language variation in terms of deviation from middle class language norms. Linguists, on the otherhand, view language variation as an adequate system in itself, not deviant from anything else and not necessarily superior either.

It is difficult to see how a teacher who views her pupil's speech as deficient can appreicate or respect the child who uses a nonstandard system or how such a child can have a positive self-concept after being told that his speech is deficient. Recent research by sociolinguists clearly indicates, furthermore, that the <u>be</u> in the Black English sentence, <u>The boy be happy</u>, is not a deviation from the standard English <u>The boy is happy</u> but, instead, it shows some sort of intermittant action (see Fasold 1968; Wolfram 1968). Thus this and other aspects of the Black English system can be said to be <u>different</u> from the standard English system. It is difficult to see how it can be considered <u>deficient</u>.

Perhaps of more importance, however, is the reaction of a child when he is told that the language he speaks, the language of his parents and friends, is deficient. His response cannot be much different from his reaction to being called disadvantaged. There are already enough ways for students to be alienated and intimidated by the school system without our needing to insult his language.

Having identified some of the characteristics of language variety, having shown that certain kinds of language variation are considered artistic, and having declared that language systems have their own systematic patterns which are not deviant from each other but which are different from each other, let us focus on the relationship of language variation to literacy from the viewpoint of the child, the teacher and the teacher trainer.

How does a child's language variation affect him as he approaches literacy? For several years now, educators have been asking the following questions. Are children whose oral language does not match the written language of the early reading texts more handicapped in their learning to read than children whose oral language more nearly matches this written material? If so, what strategy should be followed? Should we try to make his oral language more nearly match the written materials before we introduce him to reading? If so, how long will this take and will this time justify delaying his learning the most crucial skill he will ever learn in his academic life? If we take the other alternative and teach him to read without altering his oral language patterns, what will the written texts be like? And what effect might this have on his oral language?*

It is logical to assume that learning to read, like learning anything else, procedes along regular lines of some sort and that learners move gradually from what they do not know and what they cannot predict

to what we want them to know and what we want them to predict. Knowing something implies that one can make predictions of what is coming next. Knowing how to read implies that the reader can predict some kind of meaning on the basis of the printed matter before him. Predictability, then, is crucial in learning and is especially to be desired in beginning reading. If predictability is so desired, it is logical to suggest that a child who has an oral language of considerable extent but who has no reading ability can be best guided in his early reading by predictable written language, that is, by written language which at least comes close to matching his oral language patterns.

There is nothing essentially new about this principle and, to a certain extent, beginning reading texts have made some strides toward divesting themselves of "See Spot run" syntax. Unfortunately, however, they have all too often replaced it with syntax which is occassionally only slightly better. Thus we can find sentences like the following in current reading texts:

1. A pin is in the thin tan mat and the cat is thin and the pig is fat.
2. Over the fence went the ball.
3. I had a hat, I did.
4. Round is a kitten.

The predictability which the child can call upon to help him read these sentences is strained to say the least. For various reasons, the textbook writers have missed the child's oral language almost as much as they did with the Dick and Jane prose of the past. One characteristic

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* For a discussion of some of these questions see J. Baratz and R. Shuy (eds) Teaching Black Children to Read (Center for Applied Linguistics), 1969.

of the effect which the child's oral language has on his future literacy, then, is that it serves as a guide to what he can expect the printed page to say. If the printed page does not reasonably match this expectation, he may be deterred or least slowed down in this quest for literacy. This mismatch of the written page with the child's oral language may stem from any number of sources including:

1. The writer's misconception of the child's oral language
2. The writer's attempt to include a maximum amount of linguistic patterns in a given sentence
3. The intrusion of metaphorical (by definition, unpredictable) language.

Thus a child's oral language variation can affect his potential literacy by not matching (or coming close to) the language of the printed page at a time when such proximity is most conducive to his acquiring literacy, a time when he most needs to call upon predictability to help in his acquisition. Or placing the blame properly, the beginning reading materials can affect a child's potential literacy by not matching (or coming close to) the oral language of the child at a time when such proximity is most conducive to his acquiring literacy, a time when he most needs to call upon predictability to help in this acquisition. If blame is to be place anywhere, I prefer to place it on the materials.

In addition to the mismatch of oral language and beginning reading materials, we can observe the effect of a child's language variation in the attitudes of both the child and the teacher toward his variation.

Historically, educators have conceived of the variations in English along a single value scale. The concept of relative appropriateness is

new, generally thought of as a product of the advent of linguists and generally misunderstood to mean that all the standards are gone. The recent development of notions of a puralistic society have rekindled the idea that there is no need to feel quilty about one's own particular kind of language variation. Undoubtedly, acceptance of this idea will be a long time in coming to the classroom but it has some very useful attitudinal benefits for the language arts and reading. If students can feel free to use the language that they have for education, they can be prevented from some of the problems of the current situation. Frequently the supposed non-verbal child is silent primarily as a defense mechanism. To use the only language he knows is to risk criticism or, at least, correction. School is a game in which one is supposed to be right as often as possible and wrong as seldom as possible. If opening one's mouth leads to being wrong, then there are two solutions: either one learns to do what is right or one keeps one's mouth shut. If the stakes of the game were to be changed, however, so that children could aquire the knowledge that we want them to acquire without risking their stakes in the game, we would be accomplishing what we are supposed to be accomplishing in every aspect but one, that of teaching standard oral English. However important it may be for our students to learn standard English, it is not so important that it be learned all at one time or that the learning of it endangers the entire educational process by causing children to retreat to silence in order to keep from being wrong.

The bi-lingual education act came into being to alleviate a similar situation among speakers of Spanish and French in the United States. Many educators felt that the beginning stages of the education process were too important to be lost or slowed down by the obstacle of the language of the classroom. To be sure, non-standard variations from the middle class norms are not exactly the same thing as foreign variations from English, but the effects are quite similar. If we can only put our well-meaning efforts to teach everything at once on the shelf for a while, if we can accept the child's entry language as a system in which beginning education can take place, and if we plot out a deliberate strategy for teaching him standard English over a period of time which will not interfere with his acquisition of reading, science, mathematics and other subjects, we will be doing a great service to the child and we will be fulfilling our deeper obligation as teachers.

For the child this mean that we should not derrogate the language tool that he has to start with. Rather than to destroy his confidence in communicating with us, we must build it up. Without this communication, whatever our finely tuned language sensitivities may be, we have no way of teaching him. Surely we are not so pretentious as to believe that he will model his speech after us. In terms of practical instruction, this means that teachers will learn to defer their desire to correct every non-standard form in the speech of their students. They will learn not to wince when they hear such forms. They will learn to evaluate the various non-standard forms in terms of their social diagnosticity. (Some features of non-standard English are more crucial than others).*

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* See Walter A. Wolfram, "Sociolinguistic Implications for Educational Sequencing," in R. Fasold and R. Shuy, Teaching Standard English in the Ghetto: Methods and Materials, C.A.L., (forthcoming).

Perhaps a more practical suggestion to be made at this time would be to address ourselves to problems of teacher training. We have suggested that materials be developed to better account for the child's language upon entry to the school and we have urged teachers to re-examine their innate desire to correct everything at once and to feel righteously obliged to react negatively to non-standard language. But these are just tag-ons to an already existing situation. Educational change has been characterized by such tag-ons for the past century. The advents of vocational education, special education and, more recently, compensatory education, have been characterized as mere tag-ons to a nineteenth century educational model.** What is needed in the field of elementary language arts and reading is not just another tag-on but a rather extensive overhaul. Such an overhaul will probably not be accomplished merely by urging teachers to adjust their attitudes toward the oral language of black children, however desirable this may be. Attitude change seldom comes about by mere wishing it or even by mouthing it. Nor is it usually accomplished in a short period of time.

Any serious attempt to prepare teachers to deal with language variation in relationship to literacy will have to pay some rather extensive consequences. The following suggestions are based on the belief that the more traditional programs in teacher training have spent far too much time on administrative matters, teaching technique and evaluation at the expense of subject matter content, This is not a new criticism but I have seen no recent evidence that the field of education has made any significant strides toward doing

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**Mario D. Fantini, "Some Theoretical Considerations for Developing New Educational Programs for the Poor," a paper presented at the Seminar on Educating the Disadvantaged, Madison, Wisconsin, April 9, 1969.

anything about it. In fact, at a recent conference on educating the disadvantaged, fully 95% of the time during the two day conference was spent on matters of funding such programs, administrating them and evaluating them. One might ask, as I did at that conference, funding what? Administrating what? Evaluating what? This is not to say that we must abandon our concern for funding, administration, teaching techniques or evaluation. We need to know these too. But whatever we do, we must begin to focus on the <u>thing</u> that we teach as well.

By far the most important focus in the child's early education centers around language. It is his only tool for communicating with us, thereby enabling us to evaluate him and teach him. The most logical subject matter for teachers to study, therefore, is the language of children in particular. In order to study the language of children, it is important for teachers to study language in a broad sense, especially as linguists see it. The following areas of preparation must form the core of a teacher's preparation. Other areas involving teaching technique, administration and evaluation should be determined only after the content areas have been thoroughly covered.

1. <u>The nature of language in general</u>. Teachers need to know about the systematic nature of language, how languages differ from each other, how they change, the difference between oral and written symbolization, and the structure of communication. Teachers should be made at least minimally acquainted with current theoretical views of linguistics. No extant college linguistics courses

suit this need exactly. Courses called "Introduction to linguistics" as they are now conceived by linguistics departments, are probably not what future teachers need. Nor are the college courses in the structure of history of the English language immediately applicable. If linguists have not developed a course which suits the need of future elementary teachers, it is high time they were made to develop such a course along with knowledgeable specialists in education. Students with special abilities in this course should be encouraged to take further work in general linguistics courses.

2. The nature of non-standard English. This area may go by several names such as Black English, language of the ghetto, language of the disadvantaged, etc. This course should include a contrastive grammar and phonology. It should reflect the recent research of Labov, Wolfram, Shuy, Fasold, Stewart and Baratz. It should contain a unit on the historical origins of current non-standards, a unit on grammatical features including the correlations with social stratification, frequency of occurrence, and social diagnosticity of the feature. The concepts of the linguistic variable, the linguistic continuum and the linguistic situation (Shuy 1969) must be seen in relation to language data.

.3. Field work in child language. After studying current approaches to the study of oral language (Slobin 1968; Shuy, Wolfram and Riley 1968), teachers should be guided in gathering language data within a disadvantaged group. They should get at least an hour of tape recorded speech of one non-standard English speaking child. They should then type-script (in regular orthography) the tape recorded data. This process will seem time consuming and laborious but it serves three good purposes:

a. To give focus and purpose to the teacher as he listens to the tape recording

b. To provide a keying devices for further study of specific pronunciations or grammatical forms

c. To provide data on syntactic patterns.

Then the teachers should be asked to focus on at least one phonological feature which seems non-standard, describe it thoroughly using the criteria of #2 and search the literature for its use elsewhere. They should do the same for at least one grammatical feature.

4. Teaching oral language to the disadvantaged child. Focus should begin with a question of the relevance of foreign language teaching techniques to second dialect learning (see Fasold and Shuy, forthcoming). It should review foreign language techniques (see Lado 1967; Finacchiaro, 1964), and discuss problems of defining standard English, social dialect, etc. Teachers should then be guided in an examination of extant oral language materials for non-standard speakers (Golden 1965, Lin 1964, Hurst 1965,

Feigenbaum 1969). They should be helped in setting up criteria for evaluating such materials.

5. Oral Language and Reading. As they examine the relationship of a child's oral language to his acquisition of reading skills, teachers should examine problems of dialect interference through phonology, grammar and orthography (see Baratz and Shuy 1969). They should examine current reading materials to determine how well they adjust to the linguistic features observed in #2 and #3.

Exactly how these five areas should be presented to teachers is by no means clear at this point. They may be in the form of five college courses or it is possible that they may combine in some way. Whether as areas, fields, courses or workshops, teachers of the disadvantaged should have primary training in the nature of language, in the characteristics of non-standard English, in foreign language teaching techniques, and in the potential interference of one dialect on another in the reading process. In addition they should have a significant exposure to child language brought about by actual contact with such children. Then, and only then, should be think about what kinds of courses in administration, classroom techniques and evaluation procedures we should offer. The core of the program is language. The core should be seen first, and all other things revolve around it. If we have not been successful in the past it may well be from our failure to see the child's language as the single most important aspect of the curriculum, especially at the beginning level.

In this paper I have tried to present the relevance of language variation to literacy. I have urged a closer relationship of written materials to the various kinds of oral language used by children on the assumption that a mismatch will prolong or perhaps even prevent the acquisition of reading. I have urged teachers to consider the potential long range effect we may have on children by being critical of their only method of communicating with us. Lastly, I have urged a reassesment of the training program for teachers of reading and language arts -- a program which has language at the center and which views methodology as the service for that core.

It is high time that we stopped fearing language variation and started putting it to work for us. At least part of our fears have been unfounded anyway. Variety, per se, is neither bad nor illogical. In fact, it is often highly valued. It is also high time that we put our priorities in order and decided that learning to read and write are more important than the immediate acquisition of standard oral English. Just as our teaching frequently puts techniques ahead of content, so we have tended to put the social aspects of English usage ahead of learning the important step in the curriculum -- writing and reading. We have learned that being a bad speller does not mean that the writer is stupid, however desireable it may be to learn to spell correctly. We expect children to acquire standard spelling gradually over several years. Is it not reasonable to expect standard oral English to be acquired in like manner? Let's give children time to acquire standard English gradually. Meanwhile, we must considerably revamp our attitude and materials with respect to non-standard varieties of English, particularly in the area of literacy.